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GREEK REFUGEES FROM THE CAUCASUS AND
THE WORK OF THE AMERICAN RED
CROSS AT SALONIQUE

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The territorial settlement in the Balkans following the great war gave Greece widely extended boundaries to the north including the rich lands along the Struma Valley and to the eastward formerly a part of Bulgaria. With a view of making this country Greek in fact as well as in name Venizelos conceived the plan of moving into it some thousands of Greek colonists who had settled in the Caucasus and along the southeastern shores of the Black Sea. British engineers and architects were employed by the Greek government to draw up plans for rebuilding the destroyed towns and villages and for laying out new ones.

The movement begun late in 1919 was fairly well underway and several thousands of Greek settlers had been transferred from the Caucasus to Salonique and thence to the new territory when the Venizelos government was turned out. The new administration of Constantine was not keen to continue the policy involving as it did the expenditure of considerable funds. No measures however were taken to restrain the steamship companies from bringing shiploads of Greeks from Black Sea ports to Salonique where most of the unfortunates remained as the government made no adequate preparations to send them onward to their new homes. For some time this movement from the Caucasus was entirely voluntary, but within recent months the pressure of hostile Kemalists from the west and of the equally hostile Bolsheviks in the east and north have converted the

quiet stream of peaceful colonists into a disorganized flood of refugees.

This was briefly the state of affairs when early last March the American Red Cross was invited to take a hand in the relief work in connection with the refugee problem at Salonique which was rapidly assuming the proportions of a national disaster. About 20,000 men, women and children had been collected in five camps in and about Salonique, the largest and most important being at Kalamavia about two miles south of the city. The refugees, especially in the Kalamavia camp, were in a state of the greatest destitution and distress and their condition was pitiable in the extreme. Only a few had a change of clothing; most of them had only the clothes on their back, while many were literally clad in rags. Food was woefully short and a large proportion showed evidence of under-nourishment. Owing to lack of proper food and clothing, to an almost complete absence of medical attention and supervision and also to extreme overcrowding, contagious diseases, especially typhus fever, were frightfully prevalent and the death rate enormous. The mortality among children under fifteen was appalling; although about one-third of the total population, they furnished some 60 per cent of the deaths. In the camp at Kalamaira the refugees were quartered in abandoned buildings used as a British cantonment during the war. These buildings were of wood and much out of repair. The roofs leaked and the walls, split and crooked, offered little protection to the cold searching winds that swept the heights above the sea on which the camp was situated. Water was short and fuel scarce. The sanitary condition of the camp was filthy in the extreme; the excellent latrine system of the British was entirely out of order and large areas about every building were fouled with human wastes.

An inspection of this camp was made early in March by the European director of the American Red Cross who made his observations the subject of a strong memorandum to the Greek government. Attention was invited to the lack of food and clothing, to the inadequate provision of medical supplies, to the appalling amount of disease and death

especially among children and to the frightful sanitary conditions. The government was informed that if energetic measures were promptly taken to improve the sanitary conditions and to supply an adequate ration, the American Red Cross would promise to give liberal amounts of clothing and medical supplies and would establish units for the care and feeding of babies and for the medical care of young children.

The American Red Cross had already an established commission in Salonique which for about a year had been running a dispensary for poor children in that city. Anticipating a favorable reply from the Greek government, steps were at once taken in Paris, the headquarters of the American Red Cross in Europe, to augment the Salonique Commission with the personnel necessary to carry on its proposed program of relief work, and large invoices of clothing and medical supplies were ordered to Salonique from the southeastern supply base at Constantinople. The first contingent of doctors and nurses arrived at Salonique shortly after the middle of March.

Conditions in the refugee camps had by this time improved very considerably. The Greek government had sent from Athens one of its foremost sanitary experts. Dr. Theophanes Aggelopoulos, a man of unusual ability and commanding personality, with long experience in handling typhus fever and in the sanitation of military camps. In the appointment of this remarkable man as director of the refugee camps, the government showed its appreciation of the gravity and seriousness of the situation. Within a short period of two weeks Dr. Aggelopoulos worked a veritable revolution in the general conditions of the camps. He established a hospital of five hundred beds and, in the absence of trained nurses, organized a corps of aides from among the more intelligent of the refugee women; he put into operation a system of daily medical inspection in the barracks to separate the sick from the well; he systematized and improved the arrangements for feeding by substituting central kitchens for individual family cooking; and he removed the universal surface pollution and organized sanitary

squads for policing the camp. The Greek Red Cross at Athens had also risen to the occasion and had sent twelve doctors for duty in the camps and a considerable amount of clothing. Another factor of immense importance in improving the unhappy condition of the refugees was the weather. By the middle of March the cold and cloudy dampness of the late winter had given way to the balmy air and bright sunshine of spring. This brought the people out of their dark, cold, dirty quarters into the health giving sunlight and it encouraged them to take baths and to change and wash their clothing.

In accordance with the declared policy of the American Red Cross in Europe of concentrating its efforts mainly on child welfare, the program for the relief work in the refugee camps at Salonique contemplated first, the establishment of welfare centers and milk stations for babies up to three years of age; second, the opening of day dispensaries for children from three to ten years; and third the organization and operation of hospitals for the care of selected cases of babies and young children needing free treatment. In addition a clothing distribution service was planned for both children and adults.

By the time the Red Cross was ready to begin work, early in April, the relief problem had increased greatly in proportions by the arrival at Salonique of three or four steamers from the Black Sea bringing some 13,000 additional refugees. As practically all the available barracks in the vicinity of the city were already occupied, the Greek government made preparations to house these newcomers in tents near the Kalamavia camp. Fortunately the weather was mild and the skies clear so that the refugees suffered no real discomfort on account of climatic conditions. They were unloaded from the boats, a few hundred a day, and passed through the excellent bathing and delousing plant at the dock which was formerly a part of the British camp. The thoroughness of this process is open to question since typhus fever which all the boats brought with them continued to spread for some weeks after the refugees were placed in camp.

A census of the two camps about this time showed a total of about 3600 children up to ten years of age, of whom about 800 were under three. Preparations were first made to open the baby center in a large barrack building conveniently placed and accessible to both camps. This was quickly repaired and remodeled to provide for the special requirements of the work. The plan as outlined contemplated the physical examination of all babies in the camps, special feeding of the sick and undernourished, special feeding of nursing mothers, medical care of the sick, and instruction of mothers in the care of well babies. The work was in charge of an American doctor and a Red Cross nurse who had had much experience in the organization and management of baby centers. Additional assistance was provided by nurses aides selected from intelligent women among the refugees and by volunteer workers from Salonique. During the first week 262 babies were examined and placed under observation and treatment.

The dispensary work for older children was carried on in an adjoining barracks refitted to provide a waiting room for patients, an examining and consultation room, a surgical dressing room, a laboratory for clinical microscopical examinations, and a drug room. This work was in charge of an American physician and two Red Cross nurses assisted by four or five native personnel as aides and interpreters.

The hospital was opened in another nearby barracks which was remodeled for wards, for medical and surgical cases, for an operating-room, for a diet kitchen and for the necessary store rooms. An adjoining shack was transformed into a convenient laundry. Two tent wards of twenty-five beds each were afterward added providing a total of about ninety beds. The hospital ward was in charge of the dispensary doctor assisted by three Red Cross nurses and a staff of aides, cooks and other helpers selected from the refugees.

One of the most important features of the medical relief work was the training of native personnel so that when the time should come for the withdrawal of the Americans, these units should so far as possible become self-sustaining.

With this end in view Greek women were employed as freely as possible both from the refugee camp and from Salonique and it was remarkable what adaptable material was found especially among the refugees.

Another important phase of the work at Salonique was the educational service which was undertaken by the Junior Red Cross whose funds are obtained from the school children of America. This work was in charge of a very capable woman trained in social service. She organized schools under native teachers selected from the refugees; she established a trade school for simple manual training where children were taught to use the common tools; and she organized play grounds.

Mention should be made of the praiseworthy work of a Greek society in Salonique which organized and partly supported an orphanage in the Kalamavia camp where about two hundred children are cared for. Besides looking after the immediate needs of these orphans, this society finds places for them in Greek homes or in charitable institutions. The American Red Cross has taken over the medical care of these children and has supplied clothing, blankets and other necessities.

The ultimate solution of the refugee problem at Salonique depends on the ability of the government to find suitable homes for these unfortunate people. At present they are being sent away to various villages in northern Greece at the rate of some two or three hundred daily. If no additional contingents arrive at Salonique the government authorities hope to have them all distributed before winter.